

Channel
Islands
National
Park

OVERLOOKED
PARKS

OFFSHORE ASSETS

Sallie Tisdale explores the Channel Islands, seen by millions but visited by few. Plus, your guide to three other underrated parks.

OVERLOOKED
PARKS



STAND ON SCORPION BEACH on the island of Santa Cruz, 20 miles west of Ventura. This is a place of wilderness and rough, idyllic beauty, a faint shadow just off the Southern California mainland. People come to Santa Cruz Island to camp, hike, kayak, dive, snorkel, and look for rare birds. People don't come to Santa Cruz to sit on a pebbly beach. On this warm September day, I can see blue sky and ocean and golden, grassy hills—but hardly any people.

Then a head appears in the dark waters of the bay, and soon a man in a wetsuit swims to the nearby rocks, carefully removes his fins, mask, and snorkel, and walks up to join me.

"How often do you get to the islands?" I ask him.

The Channel Islands are a short boat ride from 18 million people, but only about 90,000 people visit every year, making it one of the least visited national parks in the country.

"I've lived in Ventura for 40 years," he says. "And I've never been here before." We contemplate that in silence for a few minutes. Then he adds, "I'm kicking myself now."

Channel Islands National Park consists of five islands—Santa Barbara, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel. "Each island is like a different national park," Yvonne Menard, a National Park Service ranger, tells me at the visitor center in Ventura Harbor. "It's like we have five parks in one."

More than 2,000 species of plants and animals live on the islands, about 145 of which are found nowhere else on the planet. Because of their stunning biodiversity, the islands are routinely called the Galápagos of North America. Menard, who has worked at the park for 20 years, refuses to tell me her favorite. "They're all different," she says. "Wherever you go, you think you should go back to see more. They get under your skin."

The variety is breathtaking. Santa Cruz, at 96 square miles, is California's largest island, folded with canyons, cliffs, and grasslands; its peak is 2,450 feet high. Anacapa is spare, with famous 360° views and many birds and wildflowers. Santa Rosa has rolling hills and sand dunes, the park's only lagoon, and a stand of the very rare Torrey pine tree.

A visitor must choose. I was drawn to tiny Santa Barbara, a solitary block some 40 miles to the southwest, with dense populations of seals and seabirds. But the dock (since repaired) had washed out in a summer storm. Santa Rosa is 40 miles off the Ventura Coast, a daunting three-hour boat ride each way in the rough waters of autumn. I thought about San Miguel, which has

a fossil caliche forest and a rookery of more than 30,000 seals and sea lions, one of the largest concentrations of pinnipeds in the world. San Miguel still belongs to the U.S. Department of Defense, which used it as a Navy bombing range into the 1970s before letting the National Park Service take over management. But the Navy has abruptly decided to close the island, "due to recent concerns of possible unexploded ordnance."

I opt for Santa Cruz and Anacapa.

ALMOST ALL OF THE PARK'S VISITORS arrive by a passenger ferry run by a single concessionaire. On a sunny Monday morning in September, the two dozen people heading to Santa Cruz include a few backpackers, a group of friends going out to kayak, and several day-hikers. We bounce across on sun-flecked waves, while cheerful passengers lean on the bow, watching the islands grow into imposing mountains.

The ferry lands at two places on Santa Cruz. Most passengers step off at Scorpion, which has three kayak outfitters and a large campground about a half-mile away. Ten of us go on to Prisoners

Harbor to the west, where the park service is restoring a natural wetland and where a few preserved ranch buildings stand in the shadows of high hills. Two young men heft big packs and wave good-bye, setting out for the 18-mile hike back to Scorpion. The rest of us head to Pelican Bay. The Nature Conservancy owns much of the land on Santa Cruz, and Prisoners is at the dividing line. Since we are traveling into Nature Conservancy land, we have to sign waivers and go with a guide.

Humans have lived on the Channel Islands for at least 13,000 years. The Chumash held sway until the 1820s, followed by explorers, hermits, pirates, ranchers, sailors and soldiers, and speculators of many kinds. Some of the endemic species have been harried into near extinction—by people, but also by rats, invasive plants, feral livestock, even eagles. The rare is-

land fox is the smallest canid species in North America, about the size of a house cat and weighing around 5 pounds. When DDT almost wiped out the native bald eagles, golden eagles took over the territory. They were first attracted to piglets but soon discovered a fox buffet.

Restoration is a work of patience, hand labor, and sometimes weaponry. The black rat was eradicated from Anacapa in a controversial aerial poisoning of its three islets. More than 5,000 pigs were tracked and killed over two years on Santa Cruz. Golden eagles were relocated to mainland

Potato Harbor
on Santa Cruz
Island.

CHANNEL ISLANDS N.P.

FEE:
NONE

SIZE:
249,354 ACRES

2014 VISITORS:
348,735
(TO BOTH THE
ISLANDS AND THE
MAINLAND
VISITOR CENTERS);
90,000
JUST TO THE
ISLANDS



Cavern Point Trail on Santa Cruz Island.

California, and bald eagles were reintroduced. Endemic and rare species like the Anacapa deer mouse and *Dudleya gnoma*, a succulent also

known as the munchkin live-forever, are rebounding.

We pass many piles of fox scat, purple from their berry diet, but see no foxes. We can see into a canyon where large eucalyptus trees, brought for shade by ranchers, have been clear-cut. Fennel plants, brought as an oil crop, were spread widely by rooting feral pigs. The plants are still being removed or sprayed with herbicide; some hillsides are covered with silver-gray stands of dead fennel.

The sun is hot as we climb up the ridge. The Channel Islands were formed in part from upwelling magma, which folded in layers of diatomaceous earth; from the trail, we can look east and see clearly the layers of lava and ancient seabed in the scraped white cliffs. Scientists continue to study Native American sites, and more: The world's most complete pygmy mammoth skeleton was discovered on Santa Rosa.

I leave the group early and head back, enjoying the solitude and the sunshine and the grand view appearing and disappearing

through the trees. The wind is steady, carrying the arrhythmic *awk-awk* of big ravens as I work my way down through rocky canyons and low stands of island pine. As I round the last corner, a petite bushy-tailed fox flicks past me, gone in a moment's glance.

A DAY LATER, I am at Scorpion, crossing the cobblestone beach for the rows of colorful kayaks near the water. JD, my instructor from Channel Islands Outfitters, introduces me to my fellow students: six young men and women from Poland and Serbia, working their way around the American West.

"Take pity," I say, looking with longing at the group of grayhairs with the other instructor. I have never kayaked before and don't relish trying to keep up with 20-year-olds. JD helps us with gear, and we haul our kayaks down the stony beach. After a little practice in the small bay, we kayak west.

Two major currents meet a cold upwelling of ocean water in this channel, creating a great natural aquarium with plentiful food for the entire chain. The ocean for 6 nautical miles around the islands is a National Marine Sanctuary with strict regulations on fishing in some areas, which means the fishing is good and the sightseeing better. Sea caves riddle the cliffs, and the Painted Cave (some 20 miles away to the west) is one of the largest and deepest in the world.

In the kayaks, I quickly find that my companions' youth is no advantage. They keep stopping to splash one another and fall overboard on

Legend has it that the sheep here, lacking a reliable water source, licked the moisture off one another's wool.

purpose, allowing me to catch up. We follow JD in and out of caves, through arches and wide tunnels, and skirt the cliffs through easy waves, watching harbor seals and cormorants.

After a few hours, we switch paddles for snorkels and slip into the chilly waters by the pier. The Channel Islands are renowned for scuba diving. The water is cold—ranging from 50° to 70°—but divers know that cold often means clarity, and the visibility can reach 100 feet and more. Divers find sunlit kelp forests where plants may grow 50 feet tall with healthy fish populations that include huge black sea bass and halibut and many seals and sea lions. I find the snorkeling delightful, even a short distance from the beach. The swaying kelp can't completely hide the fish: a California moray, a stout cabezon, many opaleyes, a striped sheepshead.

Then I warm myself in the tempered sun and wander in search of the island scrub jay—on the cliffs, on the beach, anywhere—because it is found nowhere else on earth except Santa Cruz. But the closest I come is a pair of ravens trying to take apart my backpack.

On the way home, the ferry captain takes a detour; he has seen two blue whales spouting in the distance. The Channel Islands have the largest collection of blue whales in the world, with about 10 percent of the world's population visiting here every summer. As we work our way closer, a humpback whale breaches behind us. Dozens of bottlenose dolphins and more than 200 common dolphins join us—leaping and riding the bow wave on the way back to Ventura Harbor.

WHEN I SIGN IN for the ferry to Anacapa, I am warned about rough seas and high wind. "It's Captain's call," the young woman at the Island Packers desk tells me. "You may not land; you may have to leave early." Anacapa is a small, serene place, but it is the closest of the islands to the mainland and attracts many casual visitors. One young woman wearing bright capri pants, ballet flats, and enormous dangling earrings stands on the dock for several minutes, trying to decide if she will brave the waves. At the last minute, the brightness of the morning seems to catch her in its net and she climbs aboard. I join her at a table inside the small cabin.

"First trip out?" I ask.

"First time on a boat!" she laughs, exhilarated.

Anacapa—from the Chumash name, *Anyapakh*, "mirage"—is really three sheer islets connected by sandbars. East Anacapa is the most accessible, and that by a steep cement staircase. We pitch and roll 11 miles through sloppy seas. Landing Cove, the park literature tells me, is "ideal for swimming, diving, snorkeling, and kayaking"; many intrepid kayakers come here to make their way around iconic Arch Rock. But when we wallow into Landing Cove, the sea is crashing and spouting

out of blowholes in the pocked cliffs, a lethal roil of froth and waves.

There is no shade on Anacapa except for the roving shadow of a few historic Coast Guard buildings now used by rangers. The average rainfall here is less than 13 inches a year. Legend has it that the sheep that grazed here, lacking a reliable water source, turned to licking the condensation off one another's wool. Instead of shade, Anacapa has fields of island coreopsis, also called tree sunflower, blooming so brightly in the spring they can be seen from the mainland.

Taken together, all the trails of Anacapa add up to 2 miles, and visitors are required to stay on designated paths to protect the habitat. You can't get lost in this place. You can, however, get hurt; the cliffs are friable, and railroad ties are laid out at points to mark the safe edge. We wander singly and in small groups through the midday sun. The calls of brown pelicans, Western gulls, and unseen pinnipeds float by in the rush of a wind strong enough to make me stumble.

At Inspiration Point, Middle and West Anacapa march away in a rough, eroded ridge like old teeth. The great and humbling plate of sea surrounds us. Five dive boats are anchored to leeward on the first day of lobster season. Turning, turning: Arch Rock to the east, the distant mainland, the endless sea turning gold in the afternoon, the seductive cliff's edge, and the impossibly sharp needles of rock just one tempting step away.

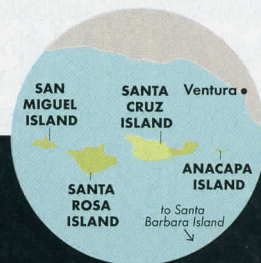
Anacapa rewards the long view and it also rewards the close look. On one rise, the soil glitters with broken abalone shell from a Chumash midden. Big piles of invasive ice plant have been pulled up to die and become mulch for carefully planted native flora, staked behind sturdy little mesh windbreaks.

The group gathers at a few picnic tables. The naturalist announces that we'll be leaving early, and we head back down the stairs an hour ahead of time—all of us but one, the young woman in ballet flats and big earrings. I think of the railroad ties. Finally a ranger bounds up the stairs and tracks her down, herding her back to the boat like a terrier.

Across the channel, we lean on the rail together, holding tight through the bouncy ride home.

"You know, we were all waiting for you," I tell her. "We didn't know where you'd gone."

"I know," she says, without apology. "I just didn't want to leave."



GETTING HERE

The park has visitor centers in Ventura (1901 Spinnaker Dr.) and Santa Barbara (113 Harbor Way, fourth floor). Island Packers (from \$59; islandpackers.com) offers boat trips to the islands. Reservations are recommended and visitors must bring everything they need, including food and water. Channel Islands Aviation (\$1,100/half-day; flycia.com) offers private plane service to Santa Rosa, and Truth Aquatics (varies by island; truthaquatics.com) has two- and three-day live-aboard dive trips that may anchor at any of the islands.

BEST TIME TO GO

In spring, wildflowers are at their peak and bird migration is under way. In fall, water temperatures approach 70°, ocean visibility is at its best, and scuba divers and snorkelers can most easily explore the marine treasures around the islands.

WHERE TO STAY

There is one campground on each of the five islands. Ventura and Santa Barbara both have a slew of hotels and motels.